

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 29
Issue 1 *Spring*

Article 2

1999

Obscurity

Martin Earl

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Earl, Martin. "Obscurity." *The Iowa Review* 29.1 (1999): 1-4. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.S092>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Martin Earl

OBSCURITY

My dream was of writing into the afternoon, free of constraint, cleansed
To a schist-like immediacy. It was after a sickness, slight but troublesome,
From which I had returned to the world with a new violence
To my ideas. Foremost among them was the decision
To write, to be writing, and the notion that writing's separateness
Was needed. That to be alone was preferable; not simply
Away from people, but to dwell in a singleness,
To explore it from the inside, no matter how repetitive or dim,
With the seriousness and dedication of a child whose world
Opens exponentially from inside an old refrigerator carton.

My second idea was that one's life, when viewed in this way,
Was still-life, sharing more with canvases of the old masters,
And their radiant stasis, as though a hand were reaching
For a silver goblet, and would, as soon as we took
Our eyes away, raise it to a set of lips just outside
The frame. I wanted to return to the parts of myself,
And place them carefully in meaningful light. I
Wanted this arrangement to be studied yet human, static
Though in full possession of time, with the resonance
Of an inner rightness which had little to do with expediency.

Lastly, and it is no mistake that all of this occurred to me
As trilogy, my afternoons and their consequences would be an arrival
Through formal application at structures which were closer
To music than to statement, but avoided the self-conscious obliquity of art-
Prose, and above all avoided its mimicry of ideals and jaded exclusivity;
That it was the formality of doing this thing which was redeeming,
Devotional, good. Destinations, like glades in a forest, seemed, above all,
Rhythmically determined, where light might enter and seep back,
Drawing us out from beneath darkened canopies, where we talk
To ourselves, cutting paths, or rest like Tarzan and Jane.

The clarity, which, the more I wrote, seemed to usher itself in
In waves, and cause the objects about me to implode with
Their own sense of self, would, I could see, be mistaken
For melancholy, or worse, the abstract and wisftul tone
Of the neo-romantic, a nostalgia softened by distance,
Borne across meadow and copse like the sound
Of hunting horns. Yes, there was a danger. As in any endeavor
Which skirts the precious, one's critics should be listened to,
And indeed a bit of their uninvested acumen held up
By the writer himself, like a match struck in a cave.

But the writer, I told myself, would not be hampered
By too many considerations beyond the immediacy
Of his own calculus. After all, the half-completed poem,
Like the tessellated patterns—half revealed—on the floors
Of those Roman villas, is a kind of reference
By which one's movement through time is substantiated
And given not only weight, but also a sense of the fanciful;
The former to mark and perpetuate, the latter to encourage
And propel. For even the writer, as cleansed and critical
As he must become, would not do away with his gods.

Thus invested, he would make promises for the good of no-one.
For as the world hurled itself into war and starved its children,
He would concentrate on the shape and dimension of his own mortality,
See it stretched before him, ethically, like an afternoon.
I charged myself with giving back to what I saw as
“The pillaged,” namely, my own spirit, whose windows stood broken
And gaping like a bakery in a war zone. I saw this
As a kind of reinvestment whose morality hinged upon the implicit
Danger of the operation. This was the most excruciating form
Of selflessness, that which would reconstruct the self.

I would need an idea which could stress the casual dependence
Of things in their arrived-at contexts and nothing more.
But that would at the same time not bury them beneath
The churchish requisites of the poem as it has come down to us,
A history of sorrow. I am not speaking of the so-called
Attempt at naturalness. In fact if anything I would highlight
Artifice, allow it to draw its own lines, to segregate the writing
From all the more quotidian marshallings that cause the days
To bridge and furrow, toneless in their hours,
Secular in their terrible waiting for something to conclude.

There were practical considerations, not the least of which was
How to make a living. I thought of the money I would need
To sustain a type of research based as it is on an avoidance of the facts,
And always shy of results, a kind of dinner conversation without the food.
It was like getting to know your wife after a long day apart,
The ambivalence you feel at having to give up once again
The storied inwardness, the whole history of silence. I watched her
Lifting packages, lining the shelves with provisions, how patiently
She culled the dying greens from the scullery bins, and I was
Tempted to say: “Of course none of this is for me . . .” For truly it wasn’t.

In the room I chose the walls are as quiet as silk.
The pressed butterfly distracts me from time. To look at the image
Of ending in the fanned wings as delicate as powder beneath their glass,
Almost in flight above the black velvet bed as though clocking the night,
Reminds me of my search for an idea which might draw beneath it
All order of experience; it left me even more scattered
Than I already was, for it was too much like the wind
Searching for something lost in the forest. Now I am content
Finding myself in a certain weather, rain say, to measure
The fold of limb-light, as though the old symbols still pertained.

For sometimes there is a strain of music broken by distance,
As though it had risen out of a valley, and followed the flank
Of a stone-clad hill to where a tree, its sole audience,
Stands—on the tree's typical Jericho—training all its branches to the task
Of assembling it anew. Though the melody is distorted,
Fragmented by the acid breeze and asphyxiated bird song,
The lumbering of heavy guns—the world as usual taking no
Notice of the tree's difficulty—it thinks it can still follow
The line of the violin, as it dips, and weaves, courting the half-forgotten
Melody, as though tracing the crisp belly of a leaf, lost, though still dear.

Though it is never too soon to admit that such models
Of apprehension, thrown up, as it were, by the correlative force
Of nature belong already to an older way of perceiving,
And so can be of little practical use in our present endeavor.
They are like the suit of clothes given to the prisoner
Upon his return to the so-called polite world. Of dubious quality,
And ill-fitting, their effect is more to exaggerate a difference
Than to promote any blending. So as he buys his first pack
Of cigarettes and stands at the bar with his first glass, he is marked
For what he is. He stands alone amidst a flurry of whispers.